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ABSTRACT

The author stresses the need for college history instructors to make an effort to help students learn how to take good lecture notes, understand reading assignments, and obtain practice in writing. He also encourages more strict admission requirements in writing skills and college-wide adoption of more rigorous coursework. Students in American colleges and universities display an alarming lack of reading and writing skills. The problem is evident not only in English classes but in all fields of study, including history. Efforts to introduce students to key questions and concepts of history, and to interest them in important books and ideas, are hampered if they cannot understand what is being presented and express their reactions to those ideas. Possible causes of the problem include the lack of authority and purpose of public schools and institutions of higher education. Reduction of admission standards, proliferation of so-called socially relevant elective courses, replacement of requirements by guidelines, and alternative grading methods have allowed students to progress through school without being forced to learn subject matter and express themselves clearly. Another aspect of the problem may relate to national apathy and mistrust of government. Also, students who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s have little interest in the history of preceding decades because society and technology have changed so drastically from one generation to the next. (AV)

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"American History in Schools and Colleges: Problems and Prospects"

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SO 012 168

I am honored to join you on this occasion.

I cannot claim to enlighten you on a subject, history education, with which you are quite familiar. Perhaps I can encourage you in your individual enterprises. I shall also offer some general reflections on what we do or don't do and share a few thoughts about our students, as we receive them and send them into the larger society.

They know about our system, of course. As one student put it on a recent examination paper: "The market place is sacrosanct, a hollowed temple where want is the regulating agency." Another student attempted definition: "The word, laissez faire, comes from French origin which means, 'let the buyer beware.'"

As any teacher knows, we have to recognize the values that dominate our students' thinking. Still another student, addressing the same question in economic history, wrote, "Laissez faire follows the basic assumption that a car will run better if you don't hold on to the wheel."

Still another student easily blended past and present as he observed: "A slave was worth four new cars, given inflation and deflation."

Some at least are a tough-minded lot. One took this position: "Since the beginning of time man has relied upon himself to survive. Indians lived in America without foreign aid."

And don't try to oppress them, for, as another student argued, "Slavery was abolished in the public schools shortly before the Civil War."

All of these statements came from papers by students who took the 1979 College Board-ETS Advanced Placement examination in American history.[1] These students are among the nation's ablest, taught by some of our best teachers. In defense of these students, it must be said that the AP tests are much more rigorous than college exams, and it is easy for these young people--who are working under considerable pressure--to commit slips in writing.

It is, moreover, easy to laugh at the mistakes of our colleagues' students. We must face the facts: genuinely serious problems appear in our own schools.

Maybe not in yours, but, I must confess, in mine. I circulate copies of two papers written in an English class during the current term at the University of Oregon.[2] The assigned subject for this little classroom essay was, "My Academic Plans." The results are embarrassing, to say the least. What, you might fairly ask, is going on at the university?

The answer is, remedial education in the case of these two students, who are enrolled in Writing 40, sub-college-level English composition. Lest we simply shrug off these students as lost causes, however, let me remind you that 5.5 per cent of the entering freshmen at Oregon had to be placed in Writing 40 in 1978, and that the figure was 4.6 per cent at Oregon State University.[3]

These Writing 40 students, moreover, entered college with respectable high-school gpa's. Almost 10 per cent of them (9.8 per cent) had high-school gpa's of 3.50 or above, almost 45 per cent (44.6 per cent) had entering gpa's of 3.00 or above, and another 51.8 per cent had high-school gpa's of 2.50 to 2.99.[4] What, we might fairly ask, is going on in the high schools?

Does it matter? Almost half (45 per cent) of these students, whose egos have been safeguarded by their excessively high grades, will be in academic difficulty during their freshman year, and a substantial number of them will leave college during the year. While almost 10 per cent earned a gpa of 3.50 or above in high school, fewer than 2 per cent will do so in college. Reality finally catches

ESSAY #1

I have been in special reading classes all my life. These past years have been the best years of my life. That goes for learning to read & write. I know I have a long way to go. I am not sure what my major is but my gole is to improve, and to get as confident as I can. I am going to be swimming on Oregon's Team, but if it interfears with my studing I wont do it as much. I am not sure what the hours are for swim-team. We are having a meating to day, & then I can tell you for sure. Ever since I started swimming I have been doing better in school. It is like it wakes wake up on it is good therapy. I am glad I am going to the University, and I hope myself good luck.

ESSAY #2

In chosing the major I did, I went through many proces of investagation. The reason I choose pre-med is, because one always has new meathods to learn and use. Doctors and hospital personal were happy to tell me about their fields, and their reasons for likes and dislikes of the caupation and the way watching what they did, was the they work main reason for deciding upon and the pre-med field. After going med this through all that work I just hope I can work hard enough in of school to recieve the grades which are need. 6

up with these young people. A recent report prepared for the Oregon State Board of Higher Education (p.54) concluded, "it is quite possible for the bright student to graduate from high school with very respectable grades without taking the time to learn the basic principles of written English. This feat is far more difficult in college."[5]

I have obviously used two extreme cases as my examples of student performance. We know, however, that many students with dismal skills in reading, writing, and computing populate our classrooms. Students appear regularly in my lower-division classes, and even in my upper-division classes, with severe deficiencies.

What has all this to do with what we teach? Our efforts to introduce students to key questions and concepts of history, and to interest them in substantial books and important ideas, will be hampered severely if they cannot understand what is being said and if they cannot express their reactions to these ideas. I have myself already assigned some books that are less sophisticated than those I used a few years ago. For instance, I have gone back to Frederick Lewis Allen's simplistic Only Yesterday in place of Paul Carter's far more challenging The Twenties in America. This is not the way I want to go.

As history teachers we must address deficiencies in skills when we encounter them, by helping students learn to take decent notes on their lectures, to understand their reading, and to obtain needed practice in writing. We cannot

entirely leave this burden to our colleagues in the English department. We must also encourage greater discipline in all academic work. By this, I mean not only skills but standards. There has been grade inflation in colleges as well as high schools. This is, I think, a sign of diminished self-respect disguised as generosity.

Some students welcome these low standards. They expect high grades for whatever they do, just as they expect their parents or society to make life generally easy for them. If they receive low marks, they grumble and want them raised. (A colleague recently disclosed to me his solution for dealing with students who want their scores elevated; and I share this device with you--it alone should be worth the price of your meal, for it works. You simply ask the student to read the paper aloud. He or she invariably stops part way through, conceding that the paper is terrible.)

Other student responses to low grades are requests to rewrite their papers, by which they mean eliminating the errors that you have already corrected, or getting test questions in advance, or taking a retest, or counting only the best paper. Some of these devices may be justified, if used fairly and carefully, but the key is to maintain rigor. Anything less diminishes respect for our teaching and, by association, for our subject.

Let me approach this matter in another way by referring to a recent column by Henry Fairlie. Fairlie, the British journalist who has written a number of penetrating books on American politics and society, recently went at education with hammer and tongs in his syndicated column for the Washington Post. Fairlie is not an authority on education, but he provides the perspective of an outsider--with a strong bias--whose children are now attending American schools.

Fairlie argued against the new cry of "back to the basics," though he believes strongly in the "basics," because he fears this slogan will be a fad doomed to disappointment. We should, he contended, "resist every new faddishness." But he aimed his fire essentially at another notion, which has prevailed for some time. "The fad which governed so many educational experiments in the past few decades was the inane idea that the purpose of education is to enable the child to express itself. One of the unfortunate results of this could be seen on the refrigerator doors of most kitchens. One went from home to home and there were virtually the same daubs of untutored infants, stuck to the refrigerators with magnets, and one lined up with other adults to admire them as if we were all tourists at the Louvre."

"....Aren't children beautiful, adults simpered aloud, haven't they beautiful souls? Children can indeed be beautiful, in their own appealing but limited way, but they do not know how to paint. Their pictures and poems are basically alike, because their personalities have as yet very little to express."

"Eventually this fad was summarized in the phrase

'learning experience,' which my own observation tells me may now be on its way out....A learning experience can be anything which anyone chooses to say is one."

"Life might be described as a learning experience. But school is not life, and is not meant to be. One goes to school not to experience but to be taught. A learning experience can be had without teachers, whereas to learn one must be taught....Children are sent to school to have things drummed into them."

"One of my daughters once came home full of complaint about her first experiences of school in America. I asked her what was wrong, "They want us to be happy at school," she said. "I thought one was meant to be happy at home, and to be made unhappy at school.""

Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings! In her 8-year-old words, she had uttered a truth. The authority of the teachers is not just a matter of discipline; it depends on acknowledging that all school teaching is a form of pressure on the child...."

"Our civilization is the anvil. Teaching is the hammer. Put the student in between, and let him be forged..."[6]

Well, I warned you that Fairlie is biased though penetrating. We cannot create in American schools the atmosphere of the English public school to which he alludes, nor is it clear that English education has been any remarkable success. Fairlie, however, has identified some weaknesses in our recent gentle approach to education. We have lost our sense of authority and of purpose. He says one thing more which bears repeating, which this time shows less of his national bias.

"We cannot expect the teacher to teach unless we believe that each subject is a body of knowledge, which we cannot tamper with without draining all vitality from it, and among which the student cannot be allowed to pick hisor her own way in selecting what to study....

"You cannot teach ancient history by not teaching ancient history, and by teaching instead some woolly interdisciplinary 'overview' of ancient history which makes it seem relevant....What is more, it is only when a subject is allowed its authority that it is able to excite...." [7]

Skills, standards, and subject matter--these are the three vital bases for the rejuvenation of history or other higher education. The schools are probably doing the most to remedy the problems of skills, with which too many college professors simply feel uncomfortable or bored. One professor at the University of Oregon recently told the Director of English Composition, "Why should I waste my time with students who can't write?"

The colleges and universities, on the other hand, may have made some progress in stemming the loss of standards. Grade inflation at the University of Oregon has slowed substantially, and in fact grading has become markedly more stringent in some liberal-arts departments and some professional schools. This was accomplished in part by publicizing departmental grading records. My impression is that grading inflation continues in the schools--I hope that I am wrong.

As for curricula, there is considerable ferment in higher education. It is widely recognized that the elective system has gotten wildly out of hand, that

the academic programs display only the rhyme of opportunism and the reason of least resistance, and that students themselves feel at a loss for direction--or, worse still, do not know what direction is.

A. Bartlett Giamatti, Yale University's young president, described the problem bluntly in an address to the Modern Language Association: "...in the last decade, incoherence has often been institutionalized... most curricula (in high school and beyond) are no better structured than many student papers; ...where requirements were replaced by guidelines, [as at Yale] those guidelines are so lacking in force they could not guide a vulture to month-old carrion, much less anyone to self-education." Giamatti attributed these dismal patterns to an attempt to apply solutions of the Sixties (a time of expansionism in numbers and finances and of a belief that academic life should be social work) to a period of demographic downturn, financial crises, competition for jobs, pressures of unionization, and student shifts to "practical areas."[8]

Turning the situation around will be difficult, for he reminded his academic audience who had created the problem. It was, he recalled, "the humanists, or at least people who taught in humanities departments, who wrote the guidelines that displaced the requirements for a B.A., who eloquently undermined the writing and the foreign language requirements, who instituted the grading reforms that, some would argue, did nothing to discourage other pressures that were inflating grades. You can call what happened then a new spirit of freedom; you can call it a 'vocational crisis'; you can

call it anything you want. The fact remains that the humanists, self-proclaimed as central and vital links to all of experience, displaced themselves, said they were not necessary to an ordered existence, even when that existence was only undergraduate education, much less society's stream of life. And in seeming to will themselves to the periphery, humanists made themselves in subsequent hard financial times perilously vulnerable."[9] Giamatti is right, of course, for the fault lies very much with ourselves.

Not alone, of course. The Eugene Register-Guard, which editorializes more often and usually more intelligently on educational questions than do many papers, turned its attention recently to the continued decline of SAT scores. Four years earlier, the editors had predicted that the SAT's would rise again because the "anti-academic winds of the 1960s and early 1970s had about blown themselves out." But now, it conceded, this was a "rash" prediction. There were a number of "modern influences that somehow limit the desire of many potentially good students to perform at peak level." Citing a College Board study of 1977, the editors mentioned television "and such national traumas as the Vietnam war and assassinations of national leaders." They then argued, once more following the Board panel, that "the curve of the SAT scores has followed very closely the curve of the entire nation's spirit and self esteem and sense of purpose." The editors wondered what will happen to the test scores "if and when that ineffable commodity, the national spirit, starts to rise."[10]

The tempting retort is that nothing will happen, for spirit without proper direction will lead education nowhere. But the issue deserves more serious attention, and some references to history might be instructive. There have, of course, been instances of a connection between fervent national spirit and educational improvement. Noah Webster recognized the relationship during the early days of the republic, when, as every student of American cultural history knows, he attempted to reinforce and purify American nationalism with his American Dictionary and American Spelling Book. Men and women in most subsequent generations have understood that the nation's future depends on its children and hence on its schools. The generation of the 1970s, in contrast, has seemed to some observers to lack both progeny and purpose.

On the other hand, there have been numerous instances of high national spirit, as during the First World War, when education was at low ebb. Recall, too, that the 1950s and early 1960s--a time of unprecedented development in education--was an era when commissions abounded and politicians stumped the land lamenting the lack of leadership and seeking national goals. One candidate even attained the presidency with the avowed purpose of getting the country moving again.

If we are to focus on the impact of the national spirit on education, moreover, we must recognize the essence of the larger phenomenon. When we look closely, we can see that the connection between spirit and education is reciprocal, not one-directional. I again turn to history to support my point. During earlier eras, religious faith, belief in republican government, a feeling of uniqueness, and a recognition of opportunity in a sprawling New World provided the necessary sense of purpose and historical context. Americans absorbed these values by precept, primer, and practical experience.

Some of the values persist, such as the instinctive recognition that American government, whatever its imperfections, has moral advantages over other forms of political organization. Some of the other values have faded. This was inevitable. Even the Puritans, who had successfully established a city on a hill, soon settled upon a "halfway covenant" to accommodate themselves to changing faiths. Even the younger generations of the morally and physically triumphant northern states eventually turned their back on Reconstruction and forgot the "bloody shirt." The disappearance of certain American beliefs ought not entirely to be lamented.

Another major generational change occurred in our own time. I date this break somewhere around 1965, or perhaps a year or two before, when the postwar baby boom came of age. Americans who grew up during or since that time did not understand, through intuition or study, the events that shaped their parents' lives--the Great Depression, the Second World War, the early Cold War, and the Age of Consensus. Nor did they

share, by a kind of givenness, the views of older Americans about their country and the entire western world. Their faces were turned toward new issues, and they could not remember what had happened. (College freshmen today have no recollection of Lyndon Baines Johnson and the Great Society, not to speak of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal.) Since they had ceased to value, to study, or to be taught history, they could not learn of these things in formal ways. Consequently, only the present moment seemed to matter.

To his credit, one ~~member~~ minister of the momentary, CBS-Television commentator Charles Kuralt wrote recently of the shortcomings of such an attitude. He described a conversation this past spring with a graduating senior at the University of Wisconsin who complained of the energy crisis, inflation, and the difficulty of finding a job: "This must be the worst time in the country's history to be graduating from college."

Kuralt reported that he let the remark pass at the time but later thought: "There was a bright young man who has just spent four years at a great university without absorbing a hint of American history. It was as if he hadn't heard about the graduates of 1861, who went straight from the campus to Bull Run and Antietam. Or the graduates of 1932, who took their postgraduate degrees in apple-selling on street corners. Or the graduates of 1943, who had the Battle of the Bulge and the Iwo Jima landing to look forward to. This graduate of 1979 knew all the headlines of the present but had no feeling at all for what Americans endured in the past. He had no sense of history--even recent history." Kuralt went on to say that

even the best TV news programs can be little more than an index to what went wrong today. The news without perspective is misleading. We have a few problems as a nation. When did we not?"[11] I would add that there cannot be a revitalized sense of national spirit without history.

So much for the present without a past. Will the future also lack history? As we consider what lies ahead, I return again to skills, such as writing, without which history teaching cannot be successful. Here we cannot expect much help from on high. In its already famous 1978 report, the Harvard faculty of arts and sciences did reaffirm the importance of writing and the connection between writing and the curriculum. But Harvard's only action was to provide for evaluation of entering freshman and to require a non-credit remedial course for "the small fraction of the class with substantial writing deficiencies."[12] Unfortunately, the writing problem at most institutions is far more extensive.

During this past autumn, the Oregon State Board of Higher Education provided that the University of Oregon and Oregon State University require for admission a score of 30 on the Test of Standard Written English in addition to a gpa of 2.50 or above.[13] This is a very modest step, though a sound one. The only effect will be to exclude a few applicants for admission with slight chance of academic success.

Improvement for our students, therefore, depends on what we do ourselves. My own department is currently considering its own curricular report. One provision is that "examinations in all courses should be largely of the essay variety." Written assignments beyond examinations are recommended for sophomore-junior-level classes. A substantial paper or the equivalent is recommended in senior-graduate-level classes.[14]

I myself have tried to aid students with their writing in a number of ways. One device which has been reasonably productive has been to review their lecture notes and to prod them to write better notes. I refer many students to our Learning Resources Center, which helps them to write better examinations and papers. I have also been examining with some interest the volume published by New Viewpoints, History: A Workbook of Skill Development, by Conal Furay and Michael Salevouris, who have devised a number of historical exercises designed to improve writing as well as analytical skills.[15]

The responsibility for maintaining standards in performance and grading likewise remains up to us. The same, of course, is true of our subject itself. As we all know, there has been a spate of curricular-reform efforts during the past year or so. At the college level, these range from Amherst, Cornell, and the Johns Hopkins on the east coast to Brigham Young and Stanford in the western states. Stanford, as I understand it, has called for a single course

in Western Civilization for all students. Princeton and Yale considered core-curriculum proposals--which at Yale would have meant two terms of history--but rejected them for more traditional distribution requirements. History remains a well entrenched and popular subject at Yale, in any event.

The misnamed Harvard core-curriculum report not only was more ambitious but was adopted. It has been subjected to much criticism for a variety of real and alleged sins, but is likely to exert considerable influence even if it does not have the momentous impact of the 1945 study. Harvard specifies Historical Study as one of five required areas for every student.[16] This means a semester in each of two kinds of historical courses. The first is a class orienting the students to some of the major concerns of the contemporary world. (The contemporary world is defined as the late 19th and 20th centuries, but the requirement allows some courses of more extended chronological coverage.*) The second kind of course, called the process of history, includes classes that examine certain transforming events--once controversial but no longer so.** There also are some historical ingredients in another area required of Harvard undergraduates, Foreign Cultures.[17] The courses in these areas, incidentally, have yet to be devised and approved.

*Examples include the development of modern political ideologies, the history of international conflicts, and trends in economic or in intellectual history.

**Examples include the triumph of the Christian Church, the Protestant Reformation, and the French, American or Russian revolutions.

At the University of Oregon, we are moving along somewhat the same paths as at Harvard. So far we have taken two concrete steps. The first has peripheral but significant consequence for History. Henceforth, any student who seeks a B.S. degree must take specified mathematics courses. This should increase computational skills and perhaps enhance what our quantifiers can do. It also will increase the numbers of students who take the alternative B.A. degree, which, I hope, also will have side benefits because it requires study of a foreign language.

The second step has been to wipe out the entire existing slate of courses which fulfilled group requirements. That had come to mean virtually every course in the University at the undergraduate level. It is anticipated that the new list will be much more restrictive, which will have considerable impact on upper-division history enrollments. A requirement in Historical Study also is proposed. I am hopeful but not unduly optimistic that this will be approved.

I do not consider curricular reform to be a panacea for history, but we must be attentive to what is going on both because of the opportunities for constructive development and because of the dangers that history might, in some cases, suffer new competitive burdens. My impression is that, so far, history is gaining slightly. You must press the case at your own institutions, however, for historical illiteracy remains a far greater danger than historical imperialism.

Your second assignment is to undertake precisely what you are doing here today: to develop your personal and institutional relationships in the field of history, to share ideas, and to organize activities. The failure of the National Endowment for the Humanities to fund the History Education Center, as it had led us to believe it would, means that there is no major prospect of massive funding to improve the position of history. I hope that the History Education Center can be recreated, so that it might serve as an organizational focal point. But we can get along without it. I think, in fact, that there has never before been so much effective activity on behalf of improved history education, though vastly more needs to be done.

Finally, and most important of all, we must ourselves be good teachers. This means that we must know our subject, improve our understanding constantly, and communicate our enthusiasm to our students. I wish you success.

Notes

1. "1979 ETS Gems, pp.1,2,6,8,10.
2. Papers from Writing 40, University of Oregon, Autumn 1979.
3. Oregon State System of Higher Education, Admissions Requirements for 1980-81 (September 14, 1979), 53.
4. Ibid., 54.
5. Ibid.
6. Henry Fairlie, "Education should be a hammering project, not a 'learning experience,' Washington Post, reprinted in Eugene Register-Guard, October 2, 1979.
7. Ibid.
8. A. Bartlett, Giamatti, "On Behalf of the Humanities," Yale Alumni Magazine and Journal, LXII (April 1979), 12-13.
9. Ibid., 13.
10. "The SAT and the National Spirit," Eugene Register-Guard, September 22, 1979.
11. Charles Kuralt, "Think About It," Parade (September 23, 1979), 26
12. Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University, Report on the Core Curriculum, in Rockefeller Foundation, Toward the Restoration of the Liberal Arts (June 1979), 56.
13. Admissions Requirements for 1980-81, 53.
14. Final Report, 1978-79, Curriculum Committee, Department of History, University of Oregon.
15. Conal Furay and Michael J. Salevouris, History: A Workbook of Skill Development (New York: New Viewpoints, 1979.
16. Report on the Core Curriculum, 46-47.
17. Ibid., 52-53.